MAGIC IN LATE ANTIQUITY: THE EVIDENCE OF MAGICAL GEMS

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Abstract

This article examines the main problems related to the so-called magical gems (semiprecious stones engraved with images of various deities or demons and characterised by the presence of symbols and inscriptions) in order to illustrate the contribution that this kind of archaeological material can make to our knowledge of magic and popular beliefs in Late Antiquity. Magical gems reflect a complex ideology, closely linked to ritual activities performed in order to achieve a number of different purposes (divination, protection against dangers, health, love, success and wealth). These aims were sought by invoking superhuman power by means of the images represented and of the formulas inscribed on the gems. Due to the complex problems raised by this kind of archaeological material, it will be necessary to limit the discussion to the analysis of some relevant examples from the available evidence.

Introduction

Magical gems are semiprecious stones engraved with images of various deities or demons. The powers depicted usually appear in their traditional Graeco-Roman and Egyptian forms, but sometimes there are new types, monstrous combinations of human and animal elements. Many of the figures have no connection with magic in themselves but are applied to magical use either by being inscribed with magical words or formulas or by being combined with solar and cosmic symbols.

Interest in magical gems is not very widespread among scholars of Classical Antiquity. First of all, magical gems have little artistic value because the images are often crudely executed. Classical archaeologists generally are not very interested in this kind of material because the inscriptions require a specific epigraphic and linguistic competence. Egyptologists have largely neglected these objects because they belong

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to a very late period and to Hellenistic culture, while historians of religion only recently have started to use systematically this kind of evidence to illustrate religious beliefs in Late Antiquity. Gems are also neglected due to their dispersal amongst many museums, and the collections of magical gems are in any case only rarely on display. Finally, as it is very difficult to interpret this type of object, so it is necessary to work in teams and use the different methodologies of the individual disciplines to fully assess their significance.

The primary aim of this paper is to show the important contribution that the study of magical gems in connection with the texts known as Magical Papyri can make to our knowledge of magical theories and practices in Late Antiquity.

A Brief History of Research into Magical Gems

In the 17th and 18th c. several works were produced in which collections of gems were discussed.[1] The authors of these works described as 'Gnostic' or '*Abrasax*' gems which bore names or inscriptions or astral symbols.[2] The definition of these gems as 'Gnostic' depended on the fact that at that time scholars considered 'Gnostics' to be like heretics, devoted to secret and magic activities.[3] Furthermore, according to Irenaeus and Hippolytus, the Gnostic Basilides counted 365 heavens, whose archon was called *Abrasax*: this name corresponds to the number 365 which also refers to the days of the year.[4] This name is often inscribed on the gems. Macarius and Chiflet who wrote essays on magical gems in the 17th c. believed that gems with the name '*Abrasax*' were created by members of Gnostic sects.[5] In 1911, De Ridder defined this kind of gem as 'magic'.[6] A few years later, in 1914, A. Delatte, when publishing the catalogue of the collections of the National Museum in Athens, rejected the name 'Gnostic' for these

[1] Gorlaeus (1707); Maffei (1707); Mariette (1732–1737). For a synthesis of the earliest research on magical gems see Zwierlein-Diehl (1991) 12–15 and Mastrocinque (2003A) 127–36.

[2] Du Molinet (1692).

[3] Capello (1702) stressed the Gnostic interpretation and this theory was universally accepted in the following century, especially by Matter (1828) and King (1887).

[4] Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 1.24.7; Hippol. *Haer.* 7.26.6.

[5] Macarius (1657).

[6] De Ridder (1911).

gems and proved that they were simply magical amulets.[7] Nowadays scholars believe that, even if it is possible that some Gnostic ideas and practices could have influenced the manufacture of magical amulets, it is not correct to attribute the production of this kind of object exclusively or mainly to a Gnostic milieu.[8]

The most important modern studies on magical gems are those of C. Bonner[9] and of A. Delatte and Ph. Derchain.[10] C. Bonner wrote the first systematic study of the gems and gave them the definition of 'magical amulets'. According to this scholar, Gnosticism was only one of the many religious traditions that contributed to the creation of magical gems.[11] A. Delatte and Ph. Derchain attributed these objects to the magical world in which they noted different religious traditions but a coherent doctrine.[12] They classified the gems on the basis of the types represented, whereas Bonner distinguished the specimens mainly by their function. Later many catalogues of collections were published, together with a number of studies on single specimens or groups of objects.[13] The *Sylloge Gemmarum Gnosticarum*, recently edited by A. Mastrocinque, has assembled many specimens published in the works of the 17th and 18th c., using an interdisciplinary method to analyze this kind of object.[14]

Magic and Religion

In the Graeco-Roman world the words *magus, magia* and other similar terms often had a negative meaning and were associated with antisocial activities.[15] Greeks and Romans believed that magic had the power to alter the regular course of nature, and due to this opinion

[7] Delatte (1914).

[8] Sfameni Gasparro (2003). On Gnosticism see Bianchi (1967); Ries, Janssens and Sevrin (1982); on Gnosticism and magic: Sfameni Gasparro (2000); Mastrocinque (2005).

[9] Bonner (1950), (1951) and (1954).

[10] Delatte and Derchain (1964).

[11] Bonner (1950) in particular 22–44.

[12] Delatte and Derchain (1964).

[13] See: A*GDS* I–IV; Pannuti (1983); Philipp (1986); Zwierlein-Diehl (1991); Henig (1994); Michel (2001); Mastrocinque (2002).

[14] Mastrocinque (2003B).

[15] See Graf (1995); Graf (2000); Dickie (2001) 12–17. A synthesis of elements in Greek and Roman magic can be found in Moreau (2000).

magic was often condemned by laws.[16] The Greek term *mageia* comes from a word used to indicate a Persian priest (*magos*); so it is possible that the negative meaning of the word depends on the hostile attitude of Greek writers towards the Persian people.[17] This may also explain why the accusation of 'magic' was at times used to attack enemies or in reference to foreign religious rituals,[18] and ancient writers viewed the nature of *mageia* as a distinctive category in Greek and Roman thinking.[19]

There are several different theories of magic in ancient Greek and Roman writing.[20] For example, Origen (184–253) wrote: 'So-called magic is not, as the followers of Epicurus and Aristotle think, utterly incoherent, but, as the experts in these things prove, is a consistent system, which has principles known to very few'.[21] Apuleius (*ca.* 125–*ca.* 180) divided magical practices into good and evil, and good magic is also divided into popular and philosophical magic.[22] The concept of philosophical magic depended on the theory of a finite cosmos in which all elements are related to one another through a cosmic sympathy.[23]

The question of possible differences among various kinds of magic is only one aspect of the more complex problem of the definition of magic itself. Modern scholars continue to debate the relationship between magic and religion, but no definition is universally accepted.[24] Some scholars have asserted that magic is easily separable from religion: Frazer saw it as a vestige of an early stage of religious development,[25] Barb as a decayed form of religion.[26] More recent studies

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[16] See Lugli (1989) 34–35 for the Roman laws against magical practices.

[17] On the Persian *magoi* as priests see Herod. 1.40, 101, 107ff., 120, 128; 7.19, 37, 43, 113f.; Xen. *Cyr. 8.1.*23; Cic. *Div.* 1.23 and 41. On the origin of the term *magos*, see Graf (1995) 21–58 and Bremmer (1999).

[18] Graf (1995) 29.

[19] Dickie (2001).

[20] See Graf (2002) for a useful synthesis on the main theories of magic in Antiquity.

[21] Origen *C. Cels* 1.24 (transl. Chadwick (1965)).

[22] Apul. *Apol.* 9.42 and 61–63.

[23] Plotinus *Enn.* 4.4.40. See Braarving (1999) 46–51 about theurgy.

[24] For a bibliographic synthesis on ancient magic see Fowler (2005). Main studies on magic: Faraone and Obbink (1991); Graf (1995); Meyer and Mirecki (1995); Schäfer and Kippenberg (1997); Braaving (1999); Asirvatham, Ondine Pache and Watrous (2001); Dickie (2001); Meyer and Mirecki (2002); Sfameni Gasparro (2003); Martin (2005).

[25] Frazer (1900) vol. 1, 62–78.

[26] Barb (1968) 114.

have modified these opinions and nowadays the most widely accepted theory is that the categories of magic and religion are indivisible but different, and many scholars do not agree on the existence of a contrast between magic and religion.[27] The problem is too complex to be fully discussed here, neither is it possible to examine all the modern theories put forward by historians of religions and anthropologists on this matter.[28] Nevertheless, it is important to stress some points of the current theoretical debate.[29] It is difficult to give a clear definition of magic because there was no single ancient view of magic and the concept of magic itself changed in different contexts and periods.[30] Magic and religion belong to the same cultural and religious context and are closely linked, because they are two co-existent ways to create communication between the human and the divine worlds.[31] Yet some important differences existed and were stressed by the ancient writers themselves.[32] Nowadays many scholars refuse to theorise about magic, even in books specifically dedicated to ancient magic, while they prefer to examine specific materials. For example, this is the case of two works on ancient magic published in 2001. N. Janowitz, in the preface of her *Magic in the Roman World*, asserts that magic is "not a coherent topic"[33] and this is the reason why she prefers not to offer a clear definition of magic itself, but only a brief survey of the theories of other scholars.[34] M. Dickie in his interesting book about people who practiced magic from the 5th c. B.C. to the 7th c. A.D. has collected and analyzed a large number of ancient sources. At the beginning of his work, in chapter 1, the scholar admits that it is very difficult to define the notion of magic, examining some theories of historians and anthropologists.[35] More recently, S. Johnston, reviewing Janowitz's

[27] Blythin (1970) 45–50; Versnel (1991) 177–97; García Teijero (1993) 123–28; Bremmer (1999) 1–12.

[28] For example see: Aune (1980) 1507–57; Faraone and Obbink (1991); Graf (1995); Luck (1997); Schäfer and Kippenberg (1997); Flint, Gordon, Luck and Ogden (1999); Sfameni Gasparro (2002) and (2003).

[29] For the main modern theories of religion and anthropology on ancient magic see Aune (1980) 1507–57; Segal (1981); Faraone and Obbink (1991); Graf (1995); Luck (1995); Schäfer and Kippenberg (1997); Flint, Gordon, Luck and Ogden (1999).

[30] See in particular Segal (1981) 351 and Gordon (1999).

[31] Blythin (1970) 59.

[32] Luck (1995).

[33] Janowitz (2001) ix.

[34] Janowitz (2001) 2–6.

[35] Dickie (2001) 18–27.

and Dickie's books and a work by D. Ogden on Greek and Roman necromancy,[36] has presented some incisive reflections about the current debate on ancient magic. Johnston stresses that: "It is the nature of scholarship to impose order, which means imposing and then defining categories… We need definitions of magic, at least for heuristic purposes".[37]

Even if it is not easy at all, it is necessary to define the phenomenon of ancient magic in order to be able to discuss theories and ideas with other scholars referring to the same categories. It is generally admitted that magic has some specific qualities. First of all, the most peculiar feature of magic is the strong power that the magician claims to hold over the divine world: he threatens and blackmails the gods, whereas the religious man is reverent towards the gods. Moreover, magic rituals are performed in a private context (the magician and his 'client'), whereas traditional religious activities have a mainly communal character. Magic is also characterised by an aggressive component, absent or present only in rare situations in religious activities.

There were many different kinds of magical practices in Antiquity (exorcism, alchemy, love rites and so on); in particular, in the late antique period, we are well informed about magic by a series of important documents, like *defixiones* and, above all, papyri and gems.[38]

The Magical Gems

Gems as Amulets in Classical and Late Antiquity

An amulet is an object meant to protect the person who wears it against ills. It is also believed to have the power to produce a positive effect or to obey the will of the wearer. Ancient people used different kinds of materials to create amulets: papyri, tissues, leaves, lead tablets. In particular, sheets of lead with inscriptions, called *defixiones*, were very commonly used from the 5th c. B.C. to the 6th c. A.D.: they were intended to influence the actions of people against their will.[39]

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[36] Ogden (2001).
[37] Johnston (2003).
[38] See Sfameni (2009).
[39] Edition: Audollent (1904). See also Jordan (1985); Gager (1992); Ogden (1999).

Since very ancient times and in many different cultural contexts, stones were used as amulets because they were believed to possess a quality to protect the wearer against dangers and diseases, and to give him some advantage. The elder Pliny (A.D. 23/4–79) gives us some useful information about stones used as amulets, the prehistoric axes used by magicians,[40] but from other sources we know that there were many kinds of magical stones, like those with a particular shape or stones fallen from the sky that had the power to shake off fetters or cast out demons.[41] It is also known that the *theurgi* used carved stones to make prophetic statues of deities.[42]

If people believed that special kinds of stones possessed specific powers, at a certain moment they thought that this power could be strengthened by carving an image or inscribing names and formulas on them. Pliny refers to the magical power of gemstones in many passages of his work. For example he wrote:

> Now I shall discuss those kinds of gemstones that are acknowledged as such, beginning with the finest. And this shall not be my only aim, but to the greater profit of mankind I shall incidentally confute the abominable falsehoods of the Magi, since in very many of their statements about gems they have gone far beyond providing an alluring substitute for medical science into the realms of the supernatural.[43]

Pliny's contempt for the superstitious belief in the magical power of gemstones is also shown in the following passage:

> There are many more stones that are even more magical, and these have received foreign names from men who have thus betrayed the fact that they are ordinary, worthless stones, and not precious stones at all. But I shall here remain content with having exposed the abominable falsehoods of the Magi.[44]

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[40] Plin. *HN* 37.135; 30.14. Cf. Mastrocinque (1998), cap.V.

[41] See Mastrocinque (2003A) 53: *Orphei Lithikà* 360–87; *Orphei lithikà kerygmata* 16.5 (ed. Halleux and Schamp (1985) 101–103 and 157); *PGM* 12.279 ss.

[42] *Corpus Hermeticum*, *Asclepius* 3.24; 37–38; *PGM* 4.3142.

[43] Plin. *HN* 37.54: '*Nunc gemmarum confessa genera dicemus ab laudatissimis orsi, nec vero id solum agemus, sed etiam maiore utilitate vitae obiter coarguemus. Magorum infandam vanitatem, quando vel plurima illi prodidere de gemmis ab medicinae blandissima specie ad prodiga transgressi*'. Transl. Eichholz (1962) 205. See also *HN* 37.118–123/24; 192.

[44] Plin. *HN* 37.193: '*Sunt et multo plures magisque monstrificae quibus Barbara dedere nomina confessi lapides esse, non gemmas. Nobis satis erit in his coarguisse dira mendacia Magorum*'.

It was in the time of the elder Pliny in the 1st c. A.D. that magical gems worn as amulets appear to have become widespread. According to Pliny, 'Nowadays even men are beginning to wear on their fingers a representation of Harpocrates and figures of Egyptian deities'.[45]

The majority of the surviving magical gems date from the imperial period (2nd–4th c.) but they remained widely diffused across the empire until at least the 5th or 6th c.[46] It is impossible in this short paper to discuss the date of every single gem discussed here, and the precise chronology of individual specimens is frequently difficult to establish, due to the crude execution of the gems and to the similar characteristics shared by gems from different periods. However, some pieces can be dated by the style and technique of their inscriptions, which often display lettering of a kind known from the 2nd–3rd c. onwards.[47] Some specimens also present a strong link with documents that can be placed with certainty between the 3rd and 5th c., in particular the magical papyri.

Production and Provenance

Most magical gems are stones carved on one or both sides, made to be set in rings or necklaces.[48] On the gems we generally find figures of various deities. Spells are usually joined to the images, but on many specimens the inscription is on its own. The text is generally written in Greek characters but there are also Egyptian, Hebrew or Aramaic words and sometimes incomprehensible combinations of letters and symbols, the so called *voces magicae* and *charakteres*. *Charakter* is the term used to indicate the small designs and figures found on magical papyri and gems that have no apparent source in any known alphabet but that have a meaning in their sequence.[49] The *voces magicae* are foreign or strange-sounding words that Greeks called *Ephesia grammata*. They

[45] Plin. *HN* 33.41: '*Iam vero etiam Harpocratem, statuas Aegyptiorum numinum in digitis viri quoque portare incipient*'.

[46] For further information see the catalogues of gems dated on the basis of stylistic and epigraphic criteria in A*GDS* I–IV; Pannuti (1983); Philipp (1986); Zwierlein-Diehl (1991); Michel (2001).

[47] Bonner (1950) 13.

[48] Cf. the snake-legged god with the cock's head on a gold necklace found in a grave at Polistis Chrysochou, in Cyprus (2nd–3rd c. A.D.): Pierides (1971) 48–49, tav. 33.

[49] For the magical use of written words and *charakteres* see Frankfurter (1994).

are in evidence already in Assyrian and Egyptian magic from the 2nd millennium B.C.[50] Names and epithets of deities are generally found in the vocative case; there are also acclamations.[51]

Magical gems were usually consecrated by priests or magicians using specific rites.[52] It is very difficult to distinguish a 'magical' gem from another gem used only for 'devotional' purposes, "car le propre de la magie est de pouvoir transformer un object ordinaire en object magique, comme l'atteste l'histoire de la lampe d'Aladin".[53] The papyri confirm that some gems with images of deities without any magical signs (inscriptions, symbols, characters etc.) were used for magical purposes.[54]

The provenance of the surviving magical gems is known in very few instances because gems found in regular excavations are very rare.[55] The great number of pieces attests to a wide distribution of this kind of material. Some scholars suggest that the gems were spread through the Roman empire by Roman legionaries.[56] In any case, it is certain that gems were carried to locations very far from the places where they were produced. It is also certain that modern collectors contributed to their dispersal. A. Delatte and Ph. Derchain observe that:

> malgré cette énorme dispersion, l'unité de doctrine, de facture plus ou moins habile, et la ressemblance générale avec la doctrine des papyrus découverts en Egypte inclinent à croire que nous nous trouvons dans la plupart des cas devant des produits de l'industrie égyptienne et plus précisément alexandrine.[57]

The central role of Alexandria in the production of magical gems is generally accepted because in this city, more than anywhere else, different ethnic communities (Egyptian, Greek, Roman) co-habited and there was an active Judaic group.[58] The Jews, in particular, were the largest foreign population in Alexandria and their monotheism with its

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[50] For the main interpretations of the *voces magicae*, see Ritner (1995) 3429–38.
[51] Bonner (1950) 167–207.
[52] Cf. *PGM* 4.1617ss.; 1716ss.; 1743s.; 12.16ss.; 201ss.; 7.579ss.; Festugière (1951) 82–83.
[53] Nagy (2002) 156.
[54] *PGM* 5.447–58: gemstone with the image of Sarapis used for divinatory dreams.
[55] Bonner (1950) 251.
[56] Neverov (1998).
[57] Delatte and Derchain (1964) 15.
[58] Delatte and Derchain (1964) 15; Barb (1968) 130.

peculiar and exclusive character set them apart from the other local communities. On the other hand, according to M. Smith, the role of Alexandria in the production of magical gems may have been exaggerated: if it is true that most of the words inscribed on these objects are Hebrew, there is no reason why gems could not have been produced in Palestine, Syria, and even Rome rather than in Alexandria.[59] Unfortunately the lack of archaeological evidence does not allow us to confirm either of these hypotheses. Nevertheless it is noteworthy that Egypt was a highly multicultural society in Late Antiquity and religion was the main area of contact between Egyptians, Greeks, Jews and even Christians.[60] D. Frankfurter has reconstructed the situation under the Roman administration in Egypt. As the economic position of Egyptian temples came under threat, the priests adopted different strategies to deal with the situation. Some of them were able to exercise their power in the local communities, thanks to their control of texts belonging to the temple tradition. Those priests could be the authors of the magical papyri.[61] Gems are so closely linked to the magical papyri, as I will try to show in the next paragraphs, that the hypothesis of an Egyptian origin for the production of magical gems seems quite probable. This does not mean, of course, that the gems could not also be made in many different regions of the Roman empire. Yet H. Philipp has pointed out how few gems have been found in the western regions of the empire. In the collection in the Rheinisches Landesmuseum in Bonn, for example, only two gems that have a German provenance are magical.[62]

The gems generally have an oval shape, while other shapes are rare; they are completely similar in form to the shapes used for non-magical gems.[63] The commonest stones used for magical gems are different qualities of jasper (green, red, yellow), agate, haematite, chalcedony, lapis lazuli, rock-crystal, carnelian, obsidian and steatite. The different kinds of stones are sometimes associated with specific figures.[64]

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[59] Smith (1967).
[60] Bagnall (1993), in particular 261–310.
[61] Frankfurter (1998) 198–233.
[62] Philipp (1986) 9.
[63] Bonner (1950) 13.
[64] Bonner (1950) 9: for example green jasper is often used for amulets with the image of the snake-legged god with a cock's head, red jasper for many Egyptians gods, yellow jasper and haematite for the 'uterine' gems. However, these associations are never universal or consistent.

Fig. 1 The snake-legged god with a cock's head (after *SGG* 284, n. 225).

Typology

The gems can be classified by type[65] or by function.[66]

It is not easy to define the typology of the main subjects represented on magical gems: we can choose the particular religious tradition represented, isolate the most significant figures, or select the types on the basis of the function of the figures depicted.

While most of the figures belong to the traditional religious pantheons (Graeco-Roman, Egyptian etc.), and their magical use is testified by the presence of inscriptions, spells, names or symbols and characters, there are some representations of deities which specifically belong to the world of magic. The most famous and mysterious is the snake-legged god with a cock's head: it is one of the most common monstrous figures represented on magical gems (Fig. 1).[67] The monster faces front, the head is usually turned to the right or sometimes to the left. The arms and the trunk are human, the right hand usually holds a whip and the left arm carries a round shield. A military kilt covers the area joining the trunk to the legs, which are serpents. The serpent

[65] See, for example, Delatte and Derchain (1964).
[66] This is the system adopted by Bonner (1950).
[67] Bonner (1950) 123–39.

legs clearly derive from the Greek tradition of the giants, but it is difficult to understand the origin and the meaning of the cock's head; the connection between snake and cock has no comparison elsewhere. It is possible to suppose an influence from Persia and Syria, but while there are many hypotheses and explanations no one is certain.[68] The solar nature of the subject is commonly recognised. This particular type has often been regarded as Gnostic because the name *Abrasax* occurs on many specimens. However, this name is also associated with many other types and it can be regarded as a word of power rather than a proper name. According to many scholars the actual name of this figure is *Iao* because this name is inscribed on the god's shield on most of the specimens. Nevertheless, like *Abrasax*, the name *Iao* is inscribed on a number of gems in connection with many different types.

There are many figures partly human and partly animal. Many deities with a human body and an animal's head were familiar to Egyptians but monstrous to Greeks and Romans. The most common such subject is the so-called *Pantheos* or *Bes Pantheos* (Fig. 2). This figure was known from the Pharaonic period.[69] On the gems the god is represented facing front, naked and often ithiphallic; two pairs of wings extend outwards from his shoulders, he has a long tail, four arms holding different objects and he often stands on an *ouroboros* containing animals, *charakteres* or names. He is a cosmic and pantheistic god with solar connections.[70]

Egyptian deities are very often represented on magical gems: in particular Isis, Osiris, Sarapis, Horus-Harpokrates and Anubis but also Thoth, cynocephali, leontocephali, other figures with animal heads, scarabs and, less often, Seth, Apis or other gods.[71] One of the most interesting figures is the image of Harpokrates on a lotus flower, called by Bonner 'the young sun' (Fig. 3).[72] It represents a naked child with a finger on his mouth seated on a lotus flower, in a boat, or on a lotus

[68] For a recent synthesis and discussion of the main hypothesis see Cosentino (2003).

[69] Ciampini, Sfameni and Lancellotti (2003) 227–29.

[70] Bonner (1950) 156–60; Delatte and Derchain (1964) 126–41; Malaise (1990) 680–729; Ciampini, Sfameni and Lancellotti (2003) 229–34. Late antique examples of this figure on gems include: Philipp (1986) n. 179 (3rd–4th c.); *AGDS* III, nn. 176–177 (4th–5th c.); *AGDS* IV, n. 76 (4th c.).

[71] See Sfameni (2002), (2003) and (2004).

[72] Bonner (1950) 140. See for example, *AGDS* III, nn.147–148–149 (3rd c. A.D.); 150–151 (2nd–4th c.); 152 (4th–5th c.).

Fig. 2 Bes Pantheos (after *SGG* 235, n. 138).

Fig. 3 Harpokrates seated on lotus flower (after *SGG* 169, n. 29).

flower placed in the middle of the boat. Around him there are often groups of wild animals, arranged in threes; very frequent too is the connection with a baboon represented in adoration.[73] This figure has a solar nature and a protective function.

On many gems typical Graeco-Roman deities are represented that have no connection in themselves with magic. They are applied to magical use by being inscribed with magical words or formulas or by being combined with magical types (for example the cock's head god with snake legs).[74] Representations of gods from the Near East or of different subjects are more rare.[75]

Another group is represented by gems with astrological figures or symbols. It is a very complex group because astrological symbols are used in association with many different subjects to strengthen the magical power of the iconography.[76]

Gems that can be classed with certainty as Gnostic are extremely rare. The obverse of one green jasper amulet shows a lion-headed male figure dressed in an Egyptian loincloth and holding in his right hand a *situla*; in his left hand he grasps a tall staff. To the right and the left of the figure are inscribed the names *Ariel Ialdabaoth*; on the reverse are inscribed the following names *Ia Iao Sabaoth Adonai Eloai Oreos Astapheos*. It is possible to compare this list of names to the series of Gnostic Archons present in the Ophite's system.[77] Origen claims that the Gnostic Archon *Ialdabaoth* could be represented as a lion,[78] and so on this gem the name *Ialdabaoth* attests to the use of the typical Egyptian iconography of the god with a lion's head, a manifestation of the sun god Horus, in a Gnostic context.[79]

A magical papyrus (4th c.) describes how to make a gem using the representation of a lion-headed figure, called *Helioros*:[80]

> The traditional rite [for acquiring an assistant] . . . You should pick up this stone; carve it at once [and engrave it later]. Once it has been engraved, bore a hole in it, pass a thread through and wear it around your neck.

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[73] See Monaca and Sfameni (2003).
[74] Bonner (1950) 148–55.
[75] For Mithras, in particular, see Mastrocinque (1998).
[76] Lancellotti (2003). On astrology and magic see in particular Gordon (1997B).
[77] Nag Hammadi Codex 2.2–7 (ed. Layton (1989) 37, § 16. See also Origen *C.Cels.* 6.24–38; in part. 30–32).
[78] Origen *C.Cels.* 6.31. See Jackson (1985) 21–26.
[79] Bonner (1949) 45; Jackson (1985) 111–15.
[80] *PGM* 1.68 = Betz (1992) 5.

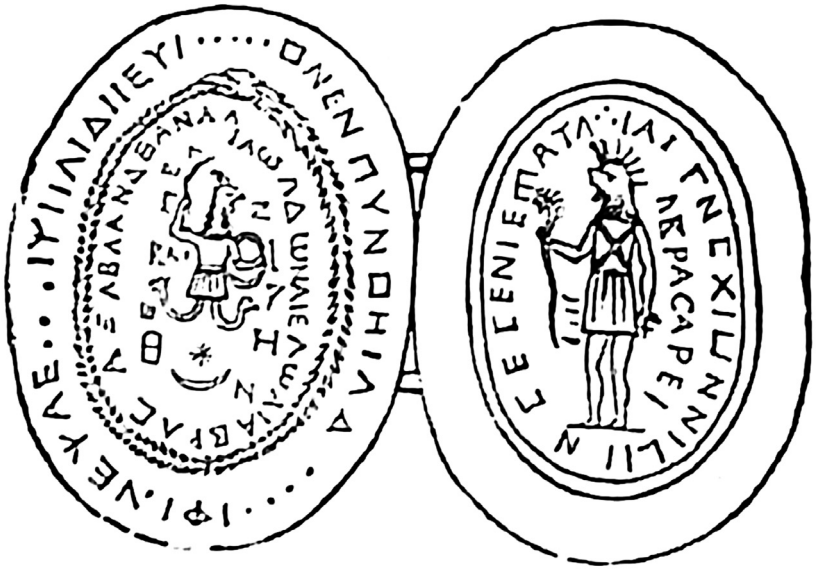

Fig. 4 Lion headed god (Helioros) (after *SGG* 266, n. 191).

> And engraved on the stone is Helioros as a lion-faced figure, holding in the left hand a celestial globe and a whip, and around him in a circle is a serpent biting its tail. And on the exergue of the stone is this name (conceal it): "ACHA ACHACHA CHACH CHARCHARA CHACH". And after passing an Anubian string through it wear it around your neck.[81]

This text demonstrates the popularity of this image without any reference to a Gnostic tradition. Some gems likewise present a male figure with a lion's head (Fig. 4).[82]

Some gems also show a Christian subject or names, often associated with different typologies.[83]

In conclusion, the figures represented on magical gems are characterised by a concentration of different divine attributes. The solar subjects are the most represented, but almost every picture has many astrological and solar symbols too.

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[81] *PGM* 1.144 = Betz (1992) 5.

[82] Cf. *AGDS* III, n. 177 (4th c.).

[83] For example, see Sfameni (2003) 158: Harpokrates on the lotus flower is associated with the names IESUS and CHRISTOS. See also Lancellotti and Sanzi (2003).

Use

The lack of archaeological contexts makes it extremely difficult to assess the use of magical gems in Late Antiquity solely from the evidence of those examples that survive. Nevertheless, literary sources give us important indications of the main functions of the gems, and a number of those sources date precisely to the late antique period. In particular the magical papyri, which are discussed further below, are dated chiefly to the 4th and 5th c. A.D. and are a crucial source for the use of magical gems. According to the papyri, magical gems were intended above all to obtain personal benefits for their owners from the deities: success, victory, favour and health were particularly requested. Many gems were used for divinatory purposes,[84] to turn away the evil eye, to throw out demons, to gain love,[85] induce sleep or to prevent it.

Gemstones with magical or medical power are named in many ancient texts, including the *Lapidari (Lithika)*, and medical works.[86] The *Lapidari* are written sources describing the characteristics and powers of stones, and although they originated in the late Hellenistic period they continued to be read and revised down to the 7th c. A.D., attesting to the ongoing interest in such writings throughout Late Antiquity.[87] In these mineralogic works there are often indications of gems representing various deities, like Jupiter, Sol, Sol and Luna, Poseidon, Mars, Mercury, Apollo, Artemis, Athena, Aphrodite, Venus, Isis, Hecate, Fides Publica, Ops and Chnoubis, and also references to gorgoneion, scarabs, and many animals, symbols, charakteres and *voces magicae*.[88] The astrological *lapidari* are a very interesting category because they are founded on the theory that the stones are under astral influence.[89] The stars also control the different parts of the human body, and so the *iatromathematica* used astral plans and stones in medical treatments.[90] The influence of a stone was believed to be more effective if a figure corresponding to the relevant star was carved on it: it is said that

[84] Bibliography in Monaca (2002). On divination in magical papyri see in particular Gordon (1997A).
[85] On love magic, in particular, see Faraone (2001).
[86] See Sfameni Gasparro (2003) 23.
[87] Hopfner (1926); Hünemörder (1999).
[88] Repertory by Nagy (2002) 170–76.
[89] Bouché Leclercq (1879–1882) 311–19; Halleux-Schamp (1985) XXVIII.
[90] Lancellotti (2001); Lancellotti (2000).

Fig. 5 Chnoubis (after *SGG* 249, n. 158).

the astrologue Teucrus of Babilonia advised carving the images of the decans on stones.[91] Many other texts also refer to gems and decans, the sideral gods that dominate the 10 degrees of the Zodiac.[92] The *Sacred Book of Hermes to Asklepius* (4th–5th c. A.D.) indicates the name and the figure of each decan, the part of the body and the illness over which he exercises his power, the stones or the plan that are useful to wear and the food to avoid.[93]

To give just one example, the image of the snake with a lion's head, called Chnoumis or Chnoubis (Fig. 5), was used to recover from stomach ache as Galen (late 2nd c.) attests:

> The testimony of some authorities attribute to certain stones a peculiar quality which is actually possessed by the green jasper. Worn as an amulet, it benefits the stomach and the oesophagus. Some also set it in a ring, and engrave on it the radiate serpent, just as king Nechepsos prescribed in his fourteenth book.[94]

The snake with a lion's head, Chnoumis, is a typical magical subject. Its name derives from the ancient Egyptian god Khnoum, identified

[91] See Festugiére (1950) vol. 1, 139, n. 2.
[92] For a figurative representation of the decans see the tablets of Grand (Abry 1993).
[93] Ruelle (1908).
[94] Gal. *De simpl.* 10.19. Bonner (1950) 54–56.

with Ammon-Ra.[95] The snake is radiate and it has a clearly solar character.[96] There are also many sources that attest that Chnoubis was also a decan:

> The decan has the name Chnoumos. Its shape comprises the face of a lion with solar rays, and its whole body is that of a serpent, coiling (*v. l.* fiery-looking), standing erect. It rules diseases which afflict the area of the earth. Engrave this decan on an agate stone, set it in whatever setting you choose with (a piece of) the "lion-foot" plant underneath it, and wear it while abstaining from hens' (?) eggs.[97]

The figure is very complex and has astrological and medical values and solar connections.[98] Alexander of Tralles (6th c.) prescribed an amulet representing Herakles strangling a lion as a cure against colic: 'On a Median stone engrave Herakles standing upright and throttling a lion; set it in a gold ring and give it to the patient to wear'.[99] Formulas to turn away illness were particularly used. For example, the image of Ares with the inscription: 'Are you thirsty, Tantal? Drink blood!' was used to recover from hemorrhage.[100]

In many cases only the iconography allows us to identify the possible uses of the gems. A number of images were used for specific medical problems: Eolo against meteorism and colic,[101] Ares to protect the liver,[102] Perseus with the Gorgon's head to cure gout.[103] The reaper was a subject used against sciatica.[104]

A well defined class of magical gems is represented by emathite stones[105] with the representation of a womb closed by a key; on the womb there are many Egyptian deities, Chnoubis, Isis, Harpokrates, Osiris, Anubis (Fig. 6). These amulets were used to favour or to avoid a pregnancy.[106]

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[95] Delatte (1914) 69.
[96] A. Kiss, s.v. *Chnoubis*, in *LIMC* III.
[97] *Sacred Book of Hermes to Asklepius*: ed. Ruelle (1908) 260; transl. Jackson (1985) 82.
[98] See Sanzi (2003).
[99] Alexander of Tralles 2.377; see also Bonner (1950) 63.
[100] Delatte Derchain (1964) 258–59, n. 364.
[101] Bonner (1950) 64–66.
[102] Bonner (1950) 66.
[103] Neverov (1976) n. 143a.
[104] Bonner (1950) 71–77.
[105] Other stones exist, in particular yellow jasper.
[106] Cf. Delatte (1914) 75–88; Barb (1953); Aubert (1989); Aloe Spada (2003).

Fig. 6 Uterine gem (after *SGG* 405, n. 374).

The images of some animals were used to protect the health of the wearer: for example the lizard[107] or the ibis.[108]

Amulets were also intended to protect against negative influences and unknown dangers that could cause death.[109] Gems used for 'black' magic practices are rare, but it is possible to distinguish the general category of 'aggressive magic' including all the objects intended to control the will and the acts of other people.[110]

The Magical Papyri

The magical papyri are a group of texts from Egypt written in Greek from the early Hellenistic period to Late Antiquity, but the majority of them belong in the period from the 3rd to the 5th c. A.D.[111] Among 130 papyri translated by H. D. Betz, only about ten can be dated to

[107] Bonner (1950) 69–71.
[108] Barb (1972) 357–62.
[109] Bonner (1950) 95–102.
[110] Bonner (1950) 103–22.
[111] The oldest papyrus (XL) can be dated to the Hellenistic period, after Alexander's death. A history of studies on the magical papyri with bibliography can be found in Brashear (1995) 3380–3684.

the 1st and 2nd c. A.D., while some are dated to the 2nd–3rd c., and the majority to the 4th and some also to the 5th and 6th c.[112] Some of the papyri are also written in Egyptian Demotic or Coptic. They include all sorts of ancient magic (love magic, apothropaic magic, revelatory magic, exorcism and so on) and they have been considered a kind of handbook for magicians. The first magical papyri were brought from Egypt to Europe in the 19th c. by Johann d'Anastasi, a Swedish diplomat stationed in Cairo from 1828 to 1859, who acquired a collection of papyri probably discovered in a grave in Thebes. These documents and the other magical papyri discovered up to about 1930 were published by Karl Preisendanz.[113] He referred to the papyri as 'Greek' (*Papyri Graecae Magicae* or *PGM*) because of their language and especially because he discovered in them theories and customs coming from the ancient Greek cultural and religious tradition. Afterwards these texts were analyzed by Classicists with a few contributions by Egyptologists.[114] During the following years many other papyrological discoveries were made and many other magical texts were published.[115] The English translation edited by H. D. Betz of the Greek texts published by Preisendanz (with a selection of texts published afterwards)[116] together with the associated Demotic texts,[117] excluded by Preisendanz, enabled scholars to become aware of the importance of the Egyptian tradition.[118] However, in this documentation all scholars have noted the presence of elements belonging to several religious traditions and they have sometimes tried to distinguish and isolate them.[119] Some magical papyri have been considered of probable Egyptian origin, while others could have a Greek or Jewish religious background.[120] In

[112] Betz (1992) xxiii–xxviii.
[113] Preisendanz (1973–1974).
[114] Nock (1972) 176–94.
[115] Daniel and Maltomini (1990–1991).
[116] Betz (1992).
[117] Griffiths and Thompson (1904) note that the original source of the Demotic texts was probably Egyptian and Bonner (1950) 22 says: "the magic of the Greek papyri is predominantly Egyptian".
[118] J. H. Johnson in Betz (1992) LV; Ritner (1995) 3371 has particularly stressed the importance of the Egyptian tradition in the writing of magical papyri: "Both Demotic and Greek spells attest to the continuity of Egyptian scriptorium traditions, whether in regard to format, purpose, mythology, incantation or ritual technique".
[119] Scholars have often based themselves on their own field of research (Greek, Egyptian, Jewish etc.) and so have particularly noted the elements related to these traditions.
[120] Festugière (1932) 281–328; Goodenough (1953) II; Smith (1996) 242–66.

particular Jewish elements are very popular. The most invoked deities are *Iao, Sabaoth*, and *Adonai*. The patriarchs of the Old Testament are seen like deities. Angels, archangels and cherubim are often invoked and there are even texts written in Aramaic.[121] In the magical papyri we can also find Mithraic, Persian[122] and Babylonian elements, while typical Latin elements are rare.

According to many scholars, Egyptian magic anticipates much of what can later be found in Graeco-Roman magic.[123] Demotic magic is different from Ancient Egyptian magic: there is an increased use of *voces magicae* and Semitic and Assyrian names such as *Mithras, Ereschigal, Abraham, Adonai, Moses, Sabaoth*.[124]

J. Z. Smith has defined the Magical Papyri as "one of the largest collections of functioning ritual texts, largely in Greek, produced by ritual specialists that has survived from late antiquity".[125] The magical papyri are an inexhaustible repertory of data on faith, religious beliefs and ideology. They are of particular importance because they are first-hand documents written by magicians. In the magical papyri there are many literary elements, like *hymni* and *historiolae*, referring to mythical episodes.[126]

In the Graeco-Roman world magical practices were founded on the philosophical belief that the universe was a *kosmos* in which all the elements were connected to each other by '*sympatheia*'.[127] This is an ancient and well-known theory, supported by Pythagorean, Platonic and Stoic philosophers with many variations but resting on a shared belief that all the cosmic elements are linked and each of them influences the others.[128] Iamblichus believed that contact with the divine world could be achieved by a series of ritual practices defined as 'theurgy', a word that means a cultural activity that allows more direct

[121] Brashear (1995) 3428. Many *voces magicae* derive from Hebrew and Aramaic.
[122] *PGM* 4.455–834, 'Mithrasliturgie'; Brashear (1995) 3423–26.
[123] Brashear (1995) 3391. For the relationship between Greek and Egyptian magic, see: Papyrus di Leida J 384 V/4.V/12 and Papyrus of London 46, 240–96, examples that attest that Greek magic depended on Egyptian practice. On Egyptian magic see: Lexa (1925); Sauneron (1951); Kakosy (1985); Roccati and Siliotti (1987); Koening (1994); Pinch (1994); Arslan (1997).
[124] Brashear (1995) 3396.
[125] Smith (1995) 21.
[126] Frankfurter (1995).
[127] Martin (1987) 28.
[128] Luck (1995) 6. See in particular, Plotinus *Enn.* 4.4.40.

contact with the gods and a higher form of knowledge.[129] These ideas were used by magicians to obtain influence and power over natural and supernatural forces and they are well attested in the texts of the magical papyri.[130]

The texts contain above all recipes and instructions for making gems, charms, amulets, figurines and potions. The charms were used to gain friendship, favour, success and victory; there are many formulas requesting a dream oracle, protection against all wild animals, to induce insomnia or for divination; there are also victory charms for the chariot races and love spells.

In conclusion, the spells offer help in the varied situations of daily life, and there are many charms useful for many purposes, like the following (3rd–4th c. A.D.):

> Prayer to Helios: a charm to restrain anger and for victory and for securing favour (none is greater)…I beg you, lord, do not allow me to be overthrown, to be plotted against, to receive dangerous drugs, to go into exile, to fall upon hard times. Rather, I ask to obtain and receive from you life, health, reputation, wealth, influence, strength, success, charm, favour with all men and all women, victory over all men and all women.[131]

The formulae are constructed by elements belonging to many different sources and they are not of an original and homogeneous composition.

In as much as it concerns our subject, the magical papyri give us important references regarding the inscriptions and the formulas on the gems and the iconography of the deities represented on them; they are also particularly important in order to clarify the goals and the modality of the making of the magical gems.[132] The Papyri attest to the existence of ceremonies of consecration before using a stone that was inscribed and carved with the images of deities.

The relation between the papyri and gems has been the subject of some controversy among scholars. According to M. Smith, who analyzed 18 cases of stones used as amulets in the *PGM*, the craftsmen

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[129] Iambl. *Myst.* 5.2.184; 1 9.29–32; 2.95–98. See Luck (1989) 185–228.
[130] Martin (1987) 22–29.
[131] *PGM* 36.211–30 = Betz (1992) 274.
[132] On the relationship between papyri and gems see: Smith (1979) 129–47; Schwartz (1981) 485–509; Sanzi and Sfameni (2009).

who made the gems did not use the papyrus texts.[133] It is said only on nine occasions that gems are to be engraved and some images of deities belonging to the Graeco-Roman pantheon used on the gems are not in themselves magical. However, Nagy and other scholars have argued that the papyri and gems are closely linked,[134] as it is possible to observe analyzing the following 4th c. text:

> Placing (a) ring. A little ring [useful] for every [magical] operation and for success. Kings and governors [try to get it]. Very effective. Taking an air-colored jasper, engrave on it a snake in a circle with its tail in its mouth, and also in the middle of [the circle formed by] the snake [Selene] having two stars on the two horns, and above these, Helios, beside whom ABRASAX should be inscribed; and on the opposite side of the stone from this inscription, the same name ABRASAX, and around the border you will write the great and holy and omnicompetent [spell], the name IAO SABAOTH. And when you have consecrated the stone wear it in a gold ring, when you need it, [provided] you are pure [at that time], and you will succeed in everything you may wish. You are to consecrate the ring together with the stone in the rite used for all [such] objects. A similar engraving in gold, too, is equally effective.[135]

This text provides a very helpful description of a typical gem with the specific ritual of its consecration and a description of its use. Most of the gems we know are engraved with the image of a snake that has 'its tail in its mouth', called the *ouroboros*, that can be alone or associated with other figures or names. It is a subject well known in Egyptian iconography but the main studies on magical gems have not analyzed this subject in depth.[136] The Egyptian *ouroboros* is a symbol of the boundary between the cosmos and chaos.[137] This iconography occurs also on Phoenician objects. In the late 4th c., Macrobius asserts that the Phoenicians considered the *ouroboros* an image of the cosmos.[138] On the late antique gems the *ouroboros* maintains his ancient cosmic character but also assumes new meanings: it is a boundary between the world and the non-world, but it is also a dynamic element that controls the *kosmos*.[139]

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[133] Smith (1979).
[134] Nagy (2002) 177–79.
[135] *PGM* 12.201–69 = Betz (1992) 161.
[136] Bonner (1950) 250.
[137] Kákosy (1986).
[138] Macrob, *Sat.* 1.9.12.
[139] Lancellotti (2002).

A gem of the Aegyptisches Museum in Berlin depicts on the obverse a scarab with a human radiate head inside an *ouroboros*, while on the reverse many names are inscribed (Figs. 7–8). This corresponds closely to the following 4th c. papyrus text:[140]

> A ring. A little ring for success and favour and victory.... Helios is to be engraved on a heliotrope stone as follows: a thick-bodied snake in the shape of a wreath should be [shown] having its tail in its mouth. Inside [the circle formed by] the snake let there be a sacred scarab [beetle surrounded by] rays. On the reverse side of the stone you are to inscribe the name in hieroglyphics, as the prophets pronounce [it]. Then, having consecrated [the ring], wear it when you are pure. The world has had nothing greater than this. For when you have it with you, you will always get whatever you ask from anybody.[141]

PGM 5 (4th c.) offers an interesting example of a gem made for divinatory purposes. It prescribes the method used to engrave an image of Sarapis on agate. The image has no magical character in itself but it is used to propitiate the divinatory dreams of the god.

> On a jasperlike agate engrave Sarapis seated, facing forwards (?), holding an Egyptian royal scepter and on the scepter an ibis, and on the back of the stone the [magical] name [of Sarapis?], and keep it shut up. When need [arises] hold the ring in your left hand, and in your right a spray of olive and laurel [twigs], waving them toward the lamp while saying the spell 7 times. And when you have put [the ring] on the index finger of your left hand with the stone inside, [keep it] thus and, going off [to bed] without speaking to anybody, go to sleep holding the stone to your left ear.[142]

There are many representations of Sarapis without any magical element, probably used for devotional purposes. In same cases, however, the presence of symbols and inscriptions reveal a magical use for the gem (Fig. 9).

We can confirm the link existing between papyri and gems by noting that in the magical papyri there are also recipes or drawings referring to the gods that are well known from the gems. For example, *PGM* 12.121–43 (4th c.) offers a precise description of the *Pantheos*:[143]

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[140] Philipp (1986) 84, n. 118.
[141] *PGM* 12.270–85 = Betz (1992) 163.
[142] *PGM* 5.477–58 = Betz (1992) 109.
[143] Betz (1992) 157–158. See also *PGM* 26.10: a drawing of a god with the head of a bird that can be compared with the god with a cock's head on the gems.

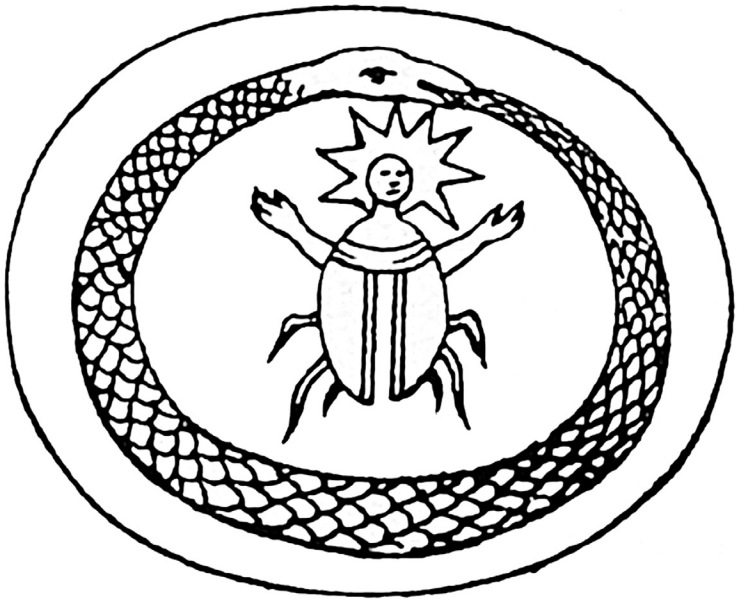

Fig. 7 Scarab (after *SGG* 220, n. 126).

Fig. 8 Plasma gem corresponding to *SGG* 220, n. 126—Ägyptisches Museum in Berlin, inv. 9876 (after *SGG*, tav. 6).

Fig. 9 Sarapis (after *SGG* 181, n. 49).

> Take a clean linen cloth and (according to Ostanes) with myrrh ink draw a figure on it which is humanlike in appearance but has four wings, having the left arm outstretched along with the two left wings, and having the other arm bent with the fist clenched. Then upon the head [draw] a royal headdress and a cloak over its arm, with two spirals on the cloak. Atop the head [draw] bull horns and to the buttocks a bird's tail. Have his right hand held near his stomach and clinched, and on either ankle have a sword extended.

Finally in *PGM* 4.2113 (4th c.) we can find a description of the leontocephalus god:[144]

> And this is the figure written on the hide: A lion-faced form of a man wearing a sash, holding in its right hand a staff, and on it let there be a serpent. And around all his left hand let an asp be entwined, and from the mouth of the lion let fire breathe forth.

[144] Betz (1992) 75.

The Magical Gems and Religious Syncretism in Late Antiquity

The constant association between various pictures of gods belonging to the Graeco-Roman and Egyptian religious traditions, *nomina sacra* like *Iao Sabaoth Abrasax*, and the names of angels, archangels, patriarchs and prophets of the Jewish tradition that we have noticed on the magical gems has been interpreted in many different ways. Some scholars have proposed a Gnostic origin for the amulets, others a Jewish origin,[145] others still an Egyptian or Greek origin.[146] Among some specimens a Mithraic influence has been recognised,[147] a Christian influence has been attributed to others.[148] Nevertheless, the more convincing opinion is that the numerous divine names are engraved on the magical gems in order to give more power to the image of the god represented, perhaps without a link to the specific religious tradition of that divine name.[149]

Writing in the first half of the 3rd c., Origen offers an important aid to understanding this phenomenon:

> On the subject of names I have to say further that experts in the use of charms relate that a man who pronounces a given spell in its native language can bring about the effect that the spell is claimed to do. But if the same spell is translated into any other language whatever, it can be seen to be weak and ineffective.[150]
>
> For example, something of the word Abraham may be translated into Greek, and something is signified by the name Isaac, and there is a meaning in the sound Jacob. If anyone who utters an invocation or oath names "The God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob" he would effect something, either because of the nature of these names or even because of their power; for daemons are overcome and made subject to him who says these things…We would say the same also of the word Sabaoth, which is frequently used in spells, because if we translate the name into "Lord of the powers" or "Lord of hosts" or Almighty (for its interpreters explain it differently) we would effect nothing; whereas if we keep it with its own sounds, we will cause something

[145] See in particular Goodenough (1953).
[146] For the influence of Egyptian magic see: Hull (1974); Ritner (1995).
[147] Mastrocinque (1998).
[148] For an analysis of the Christian subjects on magical gems see Lancellotti and Sanzi (2003) 309–11.
[149] For the magical use of divine names see: Aune (1980) 1545–47 (magical use of the name of Jesus); Smith (1996) 242–56 and Betz (1995).
[150] Origen *C.Cels.* 1.25: transl. Chadwick (1965) 25.

> to happen, according to the opinion of experts in these matters. We may say the same of Adonai.[151]

A similar doctrine can be found in the *De Mysteriis* of Iamblichus (250–330):[152]

> The translated names do not keep the same meaning, but some linguistic characteristics of one people can't be expressed in the language of another's people; and if it were possible to translate these names, the names would never retain the same power.[153]

This doctrine could explain the presence in the magical texts of many different divine names.[154] It means that the magician used as many names as possible in order to obtain more power.[155] Elements belonging to different religious traditions are so closely connected to each other in all the magical documents that most scholars use the word 'syncretism' to designate this phenomenon.[156] According to this view, the associations of divine names belonging to different religious traditions in our magical evidence must be explained in the wider context of a particular kind of syncretism with henotheistic tendencies.[157] This phenomenon is witnessed by many literary sources; among them, the most important is Macrobius (4th–5th c. A.D.) who examines the gods of the Graeco-Roman pantheon to show that every one is only a manifestation of the supreme solar god:[158] 'I tell you the highest god of all is Iao (called) Hades in winter, Zeus when spring begins, Helios in summer and in autumn splendid Iao'.[159] Apollo/Helios is the Greek god most often invoked in the magical papyri with other astral deities

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[151] Origen *C.Cels.* 5.45: transl. Chadwick (1965) 300. See also: Origen *C.Cels.* 1.24 (20–36); Origen *C.Cels.* 4.35 (transl. Chadwick (1965) 209): 'Their names are so powerful when linked with the name of God that the formula "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob" is used not only by members of the Jewish nation in their prayers to God and when they exorcise daemons, but also by almost all those who deal in magic and spells'.

[152] Van Liefferinge (2000).

[153] Iambl. *Myst.* 7.257.10–15; cf. 254.11– 260.

[154] Cf. Betz (1995*)* 153–76.

[155] See n. 148 and also Versnel (2002).

[156] Hull (1974) 27: "The most immediately striking feature of the magic of the period we are considering is its syncretism". See Betz (1991) 248 and Preisendanz (1956) 111–25.

[157] For a synthesis of the current debate on magical syncretism see Sfameni (2001).

[158] Macrob. *Sat* 1.17.4. For the doctrine, see 1.17–24.

[159] Macrob. *Sat.* 1.18.20.

such as Selene and many gods who represent the forces of the universe.[160] The cosmology of the magical papyri attests to the existence of a solar deity that rules the universe, the 'greatest god who exceeds all power'.[161]

P. Lévêque has named this kind of syncretism 'syncretism-henotheism',[162] which apparently emerged in Egypt during the Hellenistic period and then developed during the Roman period: various deities take upon themselves characteristics and specific qualities of many different gods.[163] This is the case, for example, of Isis and Sarapis.[164] Henotheism is a term constructed from the acclamation *eis ho theos* (one is -the- god) which can be found in inscriptions, papyri, gems and in literary texts: "it denotes a personal devotion to one god (there is no other god like this god) without involving rejection or neglect of other gods".[165] In the magical texts the divine names (belonging to different religious traditions) are regarded as multiple manifestations of a unique and higher divine power. The same is the case with the pictures on the gems: various deities which the papyri refer to are here carved in associations with many different divine names. It seems to be a matter of indifference to the magician whether he invokes Graeco-Roman, Egyptian or Jewish gods.[166]

It is impossible to separate the individual components of this kind of syncretism, because they are linked to each other, but this doesn't mean that this syncretism is a 'new religion'.[167] The phenomenon of magical syncretism must be seen in the wider context of Hellenistic religious syncretism because magic shares with religion, philosophy and science a cosmic system of thought and knowledge. Syncretism is not a confused mixture of dissimilar elements; rather it means the use of materials from different cultural contexts that are interpreted in a new and original way. The concentration of various divine powers in the same object created a new cultural and religious product, in the context of an overall view of the cosmos. The notion of syncretism has

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[160] See Fauth (1995) 34–114 (*Der Sonnergott in den griechischen Zauberpapyri*).
[161] *PGM* 12.285 = Betz (1992) 164.
[162] Lévêque (1973) 179–87.
[163] Dunand (1975) and (1999).
[164] Apul. *Met.* 11.5.1: 'Isis is *Numen unicum multiformi specie*'. Merkelbach (1995).
[165] Versnel (1990) 35.
[166] See Betz (1992) XLVI: "The gods from the various cults gradually merged and as their natures became blurred, they often changed into completely different deities".
[167] Casadio (1990).

had a very large field of application in studies of the history of religion, and in recent times has been criticised by some scholars. For example, A. Motte observes: "les mots 'syncrétisme', 'syncrétique' et 'syncrétiste' sont utilisés dans l'étude scientifique des religions avec une profusion et une confusion telle que leur signification en devient atypique et quasiment inopérante".[168] F. Dunand argues that it would be better to talk about the co-existence of divine figures rather than of syncretism, in particular concerning the situation in late antique Egypt.[169] Even if the abuse of the term 'syncretism' must be avoided, however, the notion of syncretism is still useful to describe the complex phenomenon of magic in Late Antiquity. But due to the difficulty in finding a single agreed definition of the term 'syncretism', it is very important to clarify the particular meaning of the word used in a specific context.

Conclusion

P. Schäfer argues that "magic was an integral part of religion in antiquity, and in late antiquity became a ferment which blurred the distinction between different religions".[170] His theory is that "the latest magic becomes the common denominator of different religions, some kind of *lingua franca* transgressing the traditional boundaries of the religions of the Mediterranean area".[171]

Actually, late antique magic is characterised by a combination of elements belonging to so many religious traditions (Graeco-Roman, Egyptian, Judaic, Christian, Gnostic) that it is impossible to separate them from each other. Nevertheless this does not mean that this syncretism is a 'new religion'.[172] Magical gems and papyri attest to the existence of a very special kind of syncretism where elements belonging to these different religious traditions are linked to each other in order to become a new whole. We can observe a clear tendency to accumulate the divine attributes associated with a particular picture

[168] Motte and Pirenne Delforge (1994) 17: this study is an analysis of the notion of syncretism with related bibliography. The classification pattern of Lévêque (1973) 179–87 is still useful, although it has been criticised in some aspects: see Dunand (1999) 97–116.
[169] Dunand (1999).
[170] Schäfer (1997) 26.
[171] Schäfer (1997) 43.
[172] Casadio (1990).

and to use divine names in formulas and spells as frequently as possible. The magician, in the exercise of his functions, brought together elements of different religious traditions in order to reach his specific aims (the acquisition of love, wealth, health, fame, knowledge of the future and control over other persons) and he used the names and images of powerful deities in order to have ever more power. Gems and papyri both reveal that the magicians knew contemporary cosmological, philosophical and theological theories, but they wanted to control the cosmic powers for practical purposes. This is the reason why religion and magic became so tightly connected without losing their own specific identities. The gems, in particular, are very useful in revealing the everyday needs of people belonging to different social classes: the existence of low quality objects proves the attractiveness of magical amulets even to the poor. Common people probably did not know the complex symbology and the exact religious meaning of the images and names used on these amulets: they only needed powerful and effective objects to face their daily problems.

On the spread and the supposed efficacy of magical amulets in Late Antiquity it is possible to quote a homily by John Chrysostom (A.D. 354–407). In this homily, the Church father reproaches his congregation for using talismans and magical words containing Christian elements:

> Each of you in fact knows that those who trust in incantations are introduced in that way to amulets and the spells of witches; and the image of the cross is surely then covered in shame, since the letters (that cover it) are held in even greater honour. Christ has been driven out to make way for an old, drunk and delirious witch; our holy mystery is trampled and it is the deceit of the devil that leads the dance.[173]

A gem of the British Museum (4th–5th c.) is particularly interesting to illustrate this passage from Chrysostom, for it actually shows a crucifix surrounded by invocations and *voces magicae* (Fig. 10).

Saint Augustine (354–430), in *De Doctrina Christiana*, also condemns the different forms of superstitions and magic, and asserts:

> Everything that has been established by men in order to create and worship idols or creatures or parts of them as if they were God, or to do

[173] Joh. Chrys. *In Ep. ad Col. hom.* 8. 5 (ed. Bareille (1865–1878) 123–24 (n.91)).

Fig. 10 Crucifix with invocations and *voces magicae* (after Michel (2001) 283).

> consultations, or to make agreements with demons on the basis of established signs, like the practices of magical arts, belong to superstition.[174]

In different passages of his works, Augustine offers to us many significant examples of the use that Christians did make of astronomical and magical activities in trying to solve their daily problems.[175]

> Actually, many bad Christians, inquirers of astronomical tablets and researchers and observers of seasons and days, reproached by us or by some good and excellent Christians for their behaviour, answered: "These things are necessary for secular life; but we are Christian in view of eternal life; we believe Christ will give us the eternal life; he is not concerned in this secular life in which we live".[176]

According to Saint Augustine, then, the 'bad' Christians justified their use of practices condemned by the 'good' Christians by asserting that these practices were effective for daily life. The scale of our evidence (gems, papyri, *defixiones* and so on) attests that the phenomenon condemned by the fathers of the Church was truly widespread.

Concluding this paper, it may also be useful to quote a papyrus (6th c.) that contains a Christian text against fever and every sickness:

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[174] Aug. *De Doctrina Christiana* 2.20.30.

[175] See, for example, Aug. *En. in Ps.* 33.18 (PL 36.318) and *sermo* 318.3 NBA 33,760. For specific references to these and other passages see Sfameni Gasparro (1997) 90–93.

[176] Aug. *En. in Ps.* 40,3 (PL 36.456).

> Jesus Christ heals trembling, fever and every disease of the body of Joseph that wears the amulet, he heals the daily and tertian fever. Erichthonios does the same. The white wolf, the white wolf, the white wolf also heals the fever with trembling of Joseph. They are fast.[177]

This is a clear example of the mixture of Christian, Greek and Egyptian elements that characterise most of our late antique magical evidence: Christ is invoked together with Erichtonios and the white wolf. According to Euripides, Erichtonios received from Athena the power to cure illnesses and the white wolf symbolises Horos-Apollo, worshipped at Lykopolis in Egypt.[178]

All these texts attest to the depth and strength of magical beliefs and practices that were characteristic of the late antique view of the world, capable of enduring even after the Christian conversion of the Roman empire.[179] The magical gems offer many useful indications to understand the *forma mentis* of common people in this period, but they must be understood in their wider context and examined with other evidence that reveals the same kind of magical ideas and rituals.

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[177] P. Köln. 851. See Leone (2000) 55.
[178] Leone (2000) 55–56.
[179] Sfameni Gasparro (1997) 91.

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Illustrations

Fig. 1. The snake-legged god with a cock's head (after *SGG* 284, n. 225).
Fig. 2. Bes Pantheos (after *SGG* 235, n. 138).
Fig. 3. Harpokrates seated on lotus flower (after *SGG* 169, n. 29).
Fig. 4. Lion headed god (Helioros) (after *SGG* 266, n. 191).
Fig. 5. Chnoubis (after *SGG* 249, n. 158).
Fig. 6. Uterine gem (after *SGG* 405, n. 374).
Fig. 7. Scarab (after *SGG* 220, n. 126).
Fig. 8. Plasma gem corresponding to *SGG* 220, n. 126—Ägyptisches Museum in Berlin, inv. 9876 (after *SGG*, tav. 6).
Fig. 9. Sarapis (after *SGG* 181, n. 49).
Fig. 10. Crucifix with invocations and *voces magicae* (after Michel (2001) 283).